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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIJING 003124

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TAGS: PHUM PGOV PREL KIRF CH

SUBJECT: BEIJING HOUSE CHURCH FINDS TEMPORARY MEETING  
SPACE; PRESSURE PERSISTS

REF: BEIJING 3073

Classified By: Political Section Chief Aubrey Carlson. Reasons 1.4 (b)  
and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: The Beijing municipal government and Shouwang house church leaders reached an agreement for the church to rent a temporary meeting space for its November 15 service. PolOff visited the site of the November 15 service and observed no confrontations between worshipers and surveilling security officials. Despite this development, church leaders continue to face pressure from the Beijing municipal authorities and are uncertain where the church will hold services after November 15. Some observers expressed belief that the Beijing government's acquiescence was a temporary measure intended to decrease tension on the day of the President's arrival in China, November 15. International media representatives were present at the November 15 service, interviewed a church elder, and have begun to report on Shouwang's plight. End Summary.

Prominent House Church Finds Temporary Meeting Space

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¶2. (C) The Shouwang Church, a large and well-known Beijing house church, which previously met in leased space in a commercial shopping center, was recently displaced after its landlords were reportedly threatened by municipal officials with tax violation charges (reftel). On November 14, a Beijing-based American consultant informed PolOff that Shouwang church and the Chinese government had reached a temporary agreement allowing Shouwang to rent a theater in which to hold services November 15.

¶3. (C) On November 15, PolOff visited the temporary meeting space, a theater directly across the street from the Central University of Nationalities (Minzu Daxue). There was a visible security presence. A Public Security vehicle was parked a short distance from entrance of the theater. A number of what appeared to be plainclothes security officials stood near the entrance. One was clearly filming people arriving at the theater using a camera concealed in a shoulder bag. PolOff observed no confrontations between worshipers and security officials.

¶4. (C) PolOff visited the north and east gates of Haidian Park, the sites of Shouwang outdoor services the preceding two Sundays. The East Gate was cordoned off with metal security barriers and guarded by uniformed and plainclothes police. At the North Gate a group of approximately 40-60 people gathered for a brief period and appeared to be distributing maps showing the location of the new service location. No confrontation was observed between this group and public security forces.

¶5. (C) A Beijing-based American consultant later confirmed that the November 15 service had proceeded "well," and was

peaceful and orderly, despite starting an hour and a half late. The meeting space had accommodated all 600-700 worshipers who arrived for the service, clergy wore formal vestments, and there was a screen to display the words for hymns and prayers during the service. At the conclusion of the service, the pastor reportedly urged worshippers not to linger or gather in the courtyard and to disperse quickly upon leaving the building.

Pressure Continues; Future Uncertain

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¶ 6. (C) Despite the temporary arrangements for the November 15 service, the harassment of church leaders continued.

Shouwang founder Pastor Jin Tianming, who had been temporarily detained to prevent him from leading the November 8 service, was able to attend the November 15 service without incident. However, Church elder Sun Yi and another pastor were late to the service after having been detained at their homes the morning of November 15. Contacts reported that the Beijing government had put pressure on Pastor Jin Tianming to disband the Shouwang church. The cell phones of Shouwang church leaders also have reportedly been shut off.

¶ 7. (C) According to Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) American Institute scholar Liu Peng, the Beijing municipal government had agreed to the temporary arrangement in order to decrease tension in the lead-up to the President's visit to Beijing (November 16-18) and in order to allow both sides to "save face." Liu was nonetheless encouraged by the solution which, in his opinion, showed that the municipal government realized that it needed to be flexible.

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Press Attention Increasing

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¶ 8. (C) International media interest in the Shouwang church has increased, as a number of foreign correspondents attended the November 15 service to interview Shouwang elder You Guanhui. Recently dismissed CASS scholar Dr. Fan Yafeng (reftel) has become more outspoken in the press, including during an interview with AP in which he characterized the current situation faced by house churches as a "crackdown" resulting from the "Communist Party's life-and-death battle" against the house church network and its ability to mobilize within China.

HUNTSMAN